AM
1936
mi

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Thesis

THE MESSAGE OF THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN BELIEVERS

by

Bruce Levant Middaugh

(A.B., Allegheny College, 1927; S.T.B., Boston University, 1930)

submitted in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

1936

1936
mi

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	THE PROBLEM AND THE METHODS USED	1
	Statement of the problem	1
	Justification of the study	1
	The methods used	4
	The sources	5
II.	THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN PREACHING IN THE BOOK OF ACTS	7
	Historical value of the sermons in Acts	7
	Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost	9
	Peter's discourse in Solomon's porch	12
	Stephen's speech of defense	14
	Peter preaches to Cornelius	15
	Briefer references to Christian preaching	16
	Summary	20
III.	EVIDENCE FROM EARLIER NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS	24
	The value of the Synoptic Gospels for this investigation	24
	Evidence from the Gospel of Mark	26
	The value of the Pauline epistles for this investigation	32
	Evidence from the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians	36

CHAPTER PAGE

The later epistles 43

Summary 45

IV. SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL FACTORS 46

The relation of Christianity to Judaism. 46

The use of the term "gospel" 54

The relation of the early church to Jesus. . . . 57

The making of Christians 60

The place of the resurrection of Jesus 63

The seeming objectivity of the gift of the Spirit 65

The later development of a Christ-mysticism. . . 68

Summary 70

V. THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN MESSAGE 71

What was the essence of the message? 71

Some corollaries 72

The developmental nature of Christianity 75

A DIGEST OF THE THESIS 77

APPENDIX. Opinions of certain modern scholars. 80

BIBLIOGRAPHY 83

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND THE METHODS USED

Statement of the problem. It is the purpose of this study to determine, so far as possible, what constituted the earliest Christian message, as proclaimed by the first disciples in the period between the resurrection of Jesus and the beginning of the ministry of Paul.

Justification of the study. It is often assumed that when the followers of Jesus preached the gospel, "the gospel" was essentially the same message as that which is believed and proclaimed by twentieth-century Christians.[1] If that were necessarily true, there would be no occasion for such a study as this. But that such an assumption is unwarranted has been shown by Case in his discussion of "The Developmental Nature of Christianity."[2] The differences of opinion among even modern Christians concerning what constitutes the essential Christian message indicate the necessity for critical study if we are to

---

[1] Compare, for example, Edwin Lewis, "The New Testament and Christian Doctrine," in The Abingdon Commentary, p. 949. Similar assumptions are made by A. E. J. Rawlinson (The New Testament Doctrine of the Christ, p. xi) and Richard B. Rackham(The Acts of the Apostles, passim).

[2] Shirley Jackson Case, The Evolution of Early Christianity, chapter I, on "The Developmental Nature of Christianity."

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2016

https://archive.org/details/messageofearlies00midd

know what the first Christians preached. If the study should show that we still hold today essentially the same conception of the gospel that the earliest believers held, we shall have a conclusion instead of an assumption. The study, then, is justified.

On the other hand, it is thought by some that our sources are so meager that such a study as this can never accomplish its purpose. We not only do not know, but we never can know, what the original message was.[3] It is true that we have no first-hand testimony about this period. The book of Acts is the only document dealing directly with the earliest Christians and their activities, and it is obviously not written by an eye-witness of the events of the first years. The most direct testimony we can get is to be found in such fragments of Acts as the author has taken over from some earlier source which may have come from an eye-witness. But in the face of all these difficulties, Easton points the way to at least a general solution of the problem, when he says:

> Undoubtedly our knowledge of this period is limited, but by making the most of what little direct evidence we have, by arguing back from the Pauline testimony and forward from Judaism, and by giving due weight to the obvious necessities of the case, we may feel assured of at least

---

[3] "The earliest Jewish-Christian message Dibelius believes to be usually unrecoverable." Burton Scott Easton, The Gospel before the Gospels, p. 33. Easton appears to cite this opinion with approval. Nevertheless, writers of the Formgeschichte school make every effort to recover the earliest version of the message that they can.

the essential matters.[4]

An added difficulty in the way of our understanding the message of the first Christians is the difference in our world-view. It is not a matter of choosing from among several modern interpretations of the gospel the one which is authentic and original. It is a matter of putting ourselves imaginatively into the state of mind of the first century. Obviously, this is not an easy thing to do. As Burkitt has said:

> The more we investigate the early history of the Christian Church with open and unprejudiced eyes, the more we find ourselves in a strange world, dominated by fixed ideas that are not our ideas and permeated by an intellectual atmosphere quite different from ours. We come to ourselves, and we rub our eyes and wonder if what we have been gazing upon ever had any reality.[5]

The apocalyptic hope which was so real to them seems fantastic to us. Yet Schweitzer has done us a real service by his extended studies which make clear the important part that apocalypticism played in the teaching of Jesus as well as in the beliefs of Paul and the early church.

Further, understanding the primitive age is difficult for us because we are accustomed to a well organized church and well defined doctrine. In spite of all the discussion of our living in "a changing world," present-day Christianity is a

---

[4] Easton, op. cit., p. 88.

[5] F. Crawford Burkitt, The Gospel History and Its Transmission, p. xi.

fixed, immutable institution compared with that of the earliest days. A priori, it would seem almost impossible that in only a very few years so much change should take place as there is between the movement depicted in the early chapters of Acts and the sort of church to which Paul's Epistle to the Romans would be intelligible. Cosmic history was in the making, and every Christian felt that he "knew not what a day might bring forth."

> The difficulty of understanding the primitive age arises very largely from our failure to appreciate this idea of a community governed by the Spirit. . . . There was no set ministry, for the gifts of the Spirit were bestowed on all; no stated mode of worship, for the Spirit moved as it listed and its impulses must not be quenched; no formal scheme of doctrine, which might exclude the new revelations imparted from time to time by the Spirit.[6]

The methods used. Since the book of the Acts of the Apostles deals directly with this period, our method is first to study the earliest Christian preaching as recorded in that book. But since a number of years elapsed between the events themselves and the writing of Acts, and since the writer was not himself an eye-witness, it is necessary to check the conclusions drawn from the study of Acts against the evidence found in earlier New Testament writings. The gospel of Mark, as being the earliest gospel, and the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, as being the earliest of the extant Pauline epistles, are of most significance here.

---

[6] Ernest F. Scott, The Beginnings of the Church, p. 78.

It is also necessary to take account of what Easton calls "the obvious necessities of the case,"[7] which are not so obvious after all, since they seem frequently to be given insufficient attention by writers on this subject. History is never inconsistent with itself. Our conclusion must not only be a reasonable interpretation of the doctrines explicitly declared by the writer of Acts, but it must also be consistent with the historical background as we know it, and must furnish a reasonable explanation of a number of noteworthy phenomena in the history. Among these are the following: the bitter opposition of the religious leaders; the baptism of converts with little or no preparation or instruction; the background of Messianic expectation; the change in the disciples after the Resurrection; the belief of the early Christians that they were preaching the same message that Jesus gave them; the development, within a few years, of a great concern with the person of Jesus; and the seeming objectivity of the gift of the Spirit.

When all of these things have been considered, the final step is a summarization of the cardinal points in the earliest Christian message, and an exposition of their relation to each other.

The sources. It will be seen from the foregoing that

---

[7] Easton, loc. cit.

the main sources are (1) the book of Acts, (2) the Synoptic Gospels, especially the second gospel, and (3) the early Pauline epistles, especially the First Epistle to the Thessalonians.

It has also been necessary to use modern studies in this field, commentaries, and so on, as indicated in the Bibliography.

CHAPTER II

THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN PREACHING IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Historical value of the sermons in Acts. The most obvious place to look for information on the early Christian message is in the reports of sermons in the first few chapters of the book of the Acts of the Apostles. We cannot, however, admit these sermons as of unquestioned authenticity and reliability, for three reasons: (1) the author of Acts wrote perhaps fifty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, and this in itself would introduce a probability of his not having portrayed accurately the mood of the first days; (2) so far as we can tell from his account, the author was not an eye-witness of the events he describes, except in the "we-sections," so-called; and (3) he apparently used the literary convention of composing speeches for his characters, as they might have spoken them, rather than recording stenographically what they actually did say.

Nevertheless, we can admit a certain amount of definite historical value in the recorded sermons and speeches of Acts I-XII. Easton has shown in a very careful study the remarkable extent to which known beliefs and practices of the early church were not read back into the life and teachings of Jesus by the

synoptists.[8] If the author of Luke can be shown in this way to have resisted the temptation to insert, in his gospel, the ideas and doctrines prevalent in the church at the time when he wrote, we have a right to assume that he exercised something of the same care in his writing of Acts. Dibelius indeed says the author "is much more bound by his material in the Gospel of St. Luke than in the Acts of the Apostles. Here he acts as an author, but in the Gospel rather as a collector and editor."[9] And Streeter believes that "it is improbable that these speeches rest on records, or even authentic memories, of what Peter actually said."[10] The objection can also be raised that the author was conscious of dealing, in the Gospel, with material of a different and much more sacred nature than that involved in his writing of Acts. We must recognize that all these objections have some weight, but surely the man who has proved himself a reliable witness in the first volume of his work cannot be held to have allowed extensive misrepresentation to

---

[8] Easton, op. cit., pp. 88ff. He takes a number of the outstanding interests of the church, such as the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues, and shows how few are the synoptic references to them in the mouth of Jesus. The gift of tongues, for example, is not mentioned in any of the Synoptics except in a saying of the risen Christ in the appendix to Mark (Mark 16: 17). "Where beliefs of the Synoptic period can be distinguished . . . from the teachings of Jesus, we find the former most scantily supported by sayings placed in his mouth." Page 109.

[9] Martin Dibelius, From Tradition to Gospel, p. 3.

[10] B. H. Streeter, The Primitive Church Studied with Special Reference to the Origins of the Christian Ministry, 126.

creep into the second volume.

There are not wanting scholars who hold that the Petrine speeches in Acts, which constitute the part we are most interested in for this thesis, are the most primitive part of the whole tradition, and should be regarded as the most important, historically. Bacon declares:

> The fundamental elements of his [Luke's] story, especially those which, like the speech of Peter in Acts 2: 14-36, embody conceptions at variance with the more elaborate, artificial, and thaumaturgic representations of the framework, [as in Acts 2:15-18, 26; 11:15, the glossalaly is what we see in 1 Cor. 14, not what Acts 2:4-11 intimates] exhibit precisely that elemental 'gospel' which we have traced in Paul.[11]

Foakes-Jackson, Denney, and Schmiedel make similar affirmations about the Petrine sermons.[12]

Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. The first recorded Christian sermon is that preached by Peter in defence of the speaking with tongues at Pentecost.[13] Stripping it to its bare essentials, there are three chief propositions involved in

---

[11] Benjamin Wisner Bacon, The Founding of the Church, pp. 55-56.

[12] F. J. Foakes-Jackson, Studies in the Life of the Early Church, p. 49.

James Denney, in A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels, J. Hastings, editor, II, 399, quotes Schmiedel (Encyc. Bibl. 1. 48), and says, "It is hardly possible not to believe that this Christology of the speeches of Peter must have come from a primitive source."

[13] Acts 2:14-36.

the sermon: (1) that this phenomenon of glossalaly is not due to drunkenness, as some bystanders have suggested, but is a sign of the coming of the messianic kingdom prophesied by Joel;[14] (2) that Jesus, who was crucified and slain, has been raised from the dead by God;[15] and (3) that the risen Jesus is exalted and constituted Lord and Messiah, and is therefore the One through whom the messianic kingdom is being brought to pass.[16] In developing these three points Peter includes some quotation of prophecy, and the following identification of Jesus:

> Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain. . . .[17]

At the conclusion of his speech, Peter's auditors ask anxiously indeed, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" The answer is "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost . . ."[18] One wonders a little at this answer, for repentance and baptism have not been mentioned in the

---

[14] Acts 2:15-21. Cf. Joel 2:28-29.

[15] Acts 2:24, 32.

[16] Acts 2:33, 36.

[17] Acts 2:22-23.

[18] Acts 2:37-38.

sermon. If the answer is historical, it must have a meaning in consonance with the essential message of the sermon. Bearing in mind the fact that John the Baptist used baptism as a symbolic rite to indicate the necessary cleansing to qualify one for the coming Kingdom, and that Jesus' first message in Mark is a call to repent and believe the good news that the kingdom is at hand,[19] we conclude that Peter's meaning is something like this: "Since this new Messianic age is just about to break, what you must do is repent and be enrolled among the accepted, while there is yet time, so that when the Kingdom is fully come you will belong to it; meanwhile you shall have the Holy Spirit, as evidenced in this gift of tongues, as a token of your membership in the Kingdom."

The historical foundation of the whole speech and of its message is found in verse 32: "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses." This fact of history is the objective basis on which Peter grounds his faith. The primitive origin of the speech is seen in the way Jesus is described and identified as "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you . . . ."[20] This verse, coupled with verse 36, goes far to establish the assertion of J. Weiss:

> The primitive Jewish-Christian Church was far from

---

[19] Mark 1:15.

[20] Acts 2:22.

> saying: Jesus of Nazareth, as He journeyed through the land teaching and healing, was the Messiah; no, He was then merely the One destined for lordship. It was only at a later period that He received the crown, namely at His resurrection and exaltation. Here comes into view the saying of St. Peter in Ac 2^{36}, which is a gem to the historian of primitive Christianity: 'This Jesus hath God made *both Lord and Christ*,' namely by exalting Him to His right hand (v. 33) and thereby fulfilling the words of Ps 110^{1} 'Sit thou at my right hand.'[21]

Bacon sums it up thus: "They realized now that he *had been* the Son of God . . . *was now* 'the Lord,' . . . and *would be* 'the Christ,' when he returned from 'the heavens.'"[22] Bulcock adds: "A simple Adoptionist view was taken of the person of Jesus. He gained his significance as an agent of the apocalyptic deliverance. . . ."[23]

Peter's discourse in Solomon's porch. After Peter and John had healed the lame man at the Beautiful gate, Peter seized the opportunity for another address, which presents practically the same assertions as his speech at Pentecost. Again he takes his departure from the striking phenomenon that the people have just seen, and ascribes it to the risen and glorified Jesus, "whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses." (3:15.) There is also the reference to

---

[21] J. Weiss, "The Acts of the Apostles," *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, J. Hastings, editor, I, 27.

[22] Bacon, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

[23] Bulcock, *Religion and Its New Testament Expression*, 213.

prophecy in explanation of the crucifixion,[24] a call to repentance in view of the approaching new age,[25] and quite an extended exposition of various Messianic prophecies as fulfilled in Jesus. It is instructive to note that instead of "Jesus, a man . . . " we now have references to "his Son Jesus,"[26] "the Holy One and the Just,"[27] and "the Prince of Life."[28] Peter is careful to include an outspoken accusation that his hearers bear responsibility for Christ's death,[29] and it is at least conceivable that his call to repentance is not a vague and general exhortation, but a concrete suggestion as to what people guilty of the death of the "Prince of life" can do about that guilt.[30]

In this speech, as in the other, the theme seems to be the coming of "times of refreshing" through the agency of this

---

[24] "But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled." Acts 3:18.

[25] "Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord." Acts 3:19.

[26] Verses 13 and 26.

[27] Verse 14.

[28] Verse 15.

[29] Verses 13-15. Cf. verse 17.

[30] Cf. the alarm in Acts 2:37, "What shall we do?" These are not men merely convinced of the coming of the Kingdom. They are "pricked in their heart," guilty.

Jesus, whom God raised and glorified. The chief difference is seen in the greater dignity accorded the man Jesus before his resurrection, though of course we cannot be sure that the author means the terms "His Son," "Holy One and the Just," and "the Prince of life" to apply to the earthly Jesus as well as the risen Christ.

Stephen's speech of defence. The longest recorded address in Acts is the speech of Stephen before the council which condemned him. Stephen begins with Abraham, and traverses the history of Israel at considerable length, with marked emphasis on the stubbornness of Israel, and the refusal of the people to accept those who were sent unto them,[31] and also on the repeated promises of God. When he gets to Solomon's temple in his account, he bursts out with a denunciation of his hearers for having slain "the Just One,"[32] as their fathers killed the prophets who foretold his coming.

In this speech, the point seems to be the rejection and death of Jesus at the hands of the religious leaders. We have

---

[31] As in Acts 7:25, 27, 28, 35, 39, 51, 52. The whole speech is found in Acts 7:2-53.

[32] "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have now been the betrayers and murderers." Acts 7:51-52.

no way of knowing, of course, what else Stephen might have said had the council heard him out, but in the speech as it stands there is no reference to the resurrection of Jesus, nor to the coming Kingdom, except as these may be understood to be implied in the reference to Jesus as "the" Just One. It is, however, evident that Stephen looks on Jesus as the One foretold by the prophets and long awaited by Israel. The Messianic implications are clear.

Peter preaches to Cornelius. The only other speech of any length in Acts I-XII is that of Peter in which he expounds his gospel to the centurion Cornelius and his family.[33] He begins with the assumption that his hearers already know from hearsay the main facts of the gospel story.[34] He tells "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power,"[35] and then summarizes in a few words the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He concludes with two statements, which may be reasonably supposed to summarize his message to Cornelius: (1) the risen Jesus had commanded his followers to

---

[33] Acts 10:34-43.

[34] "That word, I say, ye know, which was published throughout all Judaea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached." Acts 10:37.

[35] Verse 38. This goes back to the adoptionist view expressed by Peter in Acts 2:22,36.

proclaim to the people that "it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead;" and (2) the prophets all declare that whoever believes in this Judge, hence in Jesus, will receive remission of sins.[36]

In spite of the brevity of this speech, it should be of considerable value to us, because Peter is here answering a direct request for a statement of his gospel. It will be noticed that the life and ministry of Jesus are taken for granted, and used almost as mere identification of Jesus. Peter assumes that the facts of Jesus' life are well known; his essential message goes beyond them. It is a declaration about this Jesus, whom he identifies as the Jesus with whom his hearers are already familiar.

Briefer references to Christian preaching. In addition to these four speeches, Acts I-XII contains numerous brief snatches of early Christian preaching, and incidental summaries of its message. In eight passages[37] there is the direct assertion of the resurrection of Jesus, as in 4:33, where the writer says that "with great power gave the apostles their witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus."

There are seven more passages in which the burden of the

---

[36] Acts 10:42, 43.

[37] 1:22; 2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:2, 10, 33; 5:30.

message seems to be some assertion about the office or title which has been given to Jesus, that of Messiah, or Christ, or Lord. Typical of these is 5:42, where it is declared that "every day, in the temple and at home, they ceased not to teach and to preach Jesus as the Christ."[38]

There are a number of references to the fulfillment of prophecy, either in Jesus or among the believers; these do not give any direct testimony as to the content of the preaching, but they are significant because as they are used they gain their force and point from their Messianic implications.[39] They can, therefore, be regarded as indirect evidence to add to the list of passages asserting that Jesus is Messiah, or Christ. One such is the reference in 3:18 to the "things which God foreshadowed . . . Christ should suffer."

In another class of passages the message seems to be something about the coming Kingdom, the return of the Messiah, "the day of the Lord," or "the last days." It seems likely that we cannot differentiate with any accuracy among these expressions. While many have attempted to do so, the lack of explanation or elaboration in the references would seem to indicate that it is useless labor, because the speakers referred to

---

[38] Cf. 5:42; 7:52; 8:12; 9:20, 22; 10:42; 11:20.

[39] These are 1:16; 2:16-21; 3:18, 20ff; 4:11, 25-28.

a vague popular expectation with which everyone was familiar but which no one took the trouble to define accurately. In our own day, such expressions as "the end of the world," "the second coming," "the judgment day," or even simply "the end," are used in conversation by the common people in a similar way. The belief in a coming kingdom, perhaps understood in many different ways by different people, was common enough then to make exact use of terms unnecessary and even useless. The outstanding example of this kind of passage is found in 1:11. "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye looking into heaven? this Jesus, who was received up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye beheld him going into heaven."[40]

The references to the fulfillment of prophecy cited above are equally good testimony, many of them, to this preaching of the coming Kingdom. In 2:16-21, the quotation from Joel is used to confirm the doctrine that the "last days" long awaited are now here. The Day and the Lord gain their significance from each other, and neither is to be understood apart from the other. If the Christ has really appeared, in the person of Jesus, that means that the Kingdom must surely be at hand. If the Kingdom is really coming, then the various prophecies must be in process of fulfillment. Whatever proves the

---

[40] Other passages are 1:6-7; 2:16-21; 6:14; 8:12; and 10:42.

Messiahship of Jesus proves the imminent approach of the Kingdom, and whatever proves the approach of the Kingdom tends to confirm belief in the Messiahship of Jesus.[41]

There are other passages which refer, directly or indirectly, to the message and work of the early Christians without giving specific indication of the nature of the message. There are, for example, a number of cures "in the name of Jesus Christ."[42] These assume a positive message, but do not define it except to indicate that, of course, it centered around Jesus in some way. In 4:17 the apostles are commanded to "speak henceforth to no man in this name," and again in 5:40 they "charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus." Stephen's dying prayer in 7:59 gives us this indirect confession, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." In 2:11 the Christians speak in tongues "the mighty works of God." In this case, as in the statement of 4:20 that "we cannot but speak the things which we saw and heard," it is at least credible that the wonderful things which they told centered chiefly in the resurrection of Jesus, especially since there are frequent references elsewhere

---

[41] "The emphasis upon Christ's Messiahship had behind it the thought of the Salvation to be effected by the Messiah. Prophecy and miracles were to accredit Jesus as the instrument of the Messianic Soteriology. The Resurrection itself had this value. . . ." H. Bulcock, Religion and Its New Testament Expression, p. 213.

[42] As in 3:1ff; 4:10, 30; 5:14-16; 9:34.

to the apostles as being "witnesses of his resurrection."[43] In 8:15, "Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and proclaimed unto them the Christ." In 8:25, 35; 9:15; and 11:20 there are similarly indefinite references to the message.

It is noteworthy that we find in Acts I-XII no group of passages exhibiting a certain aspect of the message that we might have expected would receive considerable attention -- the preaching of the forgiveness or remission of sins.[44] Apparently, this doctrine is a derivative, rather than an independent, message. It comes in finally because the Kingdom must involve righteousness, and since no one is righteous enough to enter, any One who would bring in the Kingdom must manage the forgiveness of sins for those who are to enter.

Summary. It will be seen from the foregoing that the first twelve chapters of Acts give a quite consistent picture of the earliest Christian preaching. The Apostles, according to this account, did not think of themselves as religious teachers but as witnesses. We may wonder just how much legal connotation should be given to the word "witness" as it is used here, but without trying to decide that point we may note that it seemed to be their task chiefly to bear witness to certain things about Jesus, objective observations, and especially to

---

[43] Acts 1:22; 4:33; 5:32; etc.

[44] Acts 13:38, and later passages.

his resurrection.[45] This fact of the resurrection of Jesus gained its significance from what it proved, i. e., that Jesus was "made both Lord and Christ," and that therefore the Kingdom was about to dawn.[46]

Dibelius finds it noteworthy that although "the author of Acts was not bound by the composition of the speeches but had the right to shape them according to his own ideas," nevertheless he "did not exercise that right with . . . concern about variations."[47] Certainly, the speeches we have show remarkable uniformity of message and treatment. "We have the right to speak of a scheme which the author consciously accepts and which consists of the following: Kerygma or message, scriptural proof, exhortation to repentance. The Kerygma, i. e. the preaching of Jesus Christ, was contained in a few short sentences."[48] Whether we consult the comparatively long speeches of Peter and Stephen (and, later, Paul) or the shorter summa-

---

[45] Acts 1:22 and elsewhere.

[46] "That there is to be a judgment of the world had, indeed, been already declared, but that the Judge 'appointed by God over living and dead' (10^{42}) is already present in heaven (3^{21}), has already been manifested on earth ($1^{3}10^{40f}$), and accredited by God through an unprecedented miracle--this is the cardinal and significant message of the Apostles." J. Weiss, "The Acts of the Apostles," A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels, I, p. 26.

[47] Dibelius, op. cit., p. 16.

[48] Op. cit., p. 17. He finds the kerygma in 2:22ff, etc.

ries, hints, and allusions, we find that the essential message in Acts consists of the Messiahship of Jesus and the coming of the Kingdom, the former proclaimed essentially for the sake of the latter. This is backed up by the witness of the apostles to (1) the wonderful words and works of Jesus, which are cited to prove his supra-normal nature;[49] (2) his resurrection from the dead, which is used to explain away the shame of the cross and to prove God's special vindication and glorification of him; and (3) the fulfillment of prophecy (both in the details of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and also in the events which have taken place and are taking place among his followers),[50] which is used to prove that the long-expected "last days" are actually here.

There are significant omissions in this statement of the early kerygma. No reference is made, of course, to the teachings of Jesus as being valuable in themselves; they have only evidential value. Likewise, his deeds are to be admired and

---

[49] As in Acts 2:22, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God unto you by mighty works and wonders and signs which God did by him in the midst of you." Also in 10:38, "Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power; who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him." Cf. John 3:2, "No one can do these things that thou doest, except God be with him."

[50] Every conceivable event was pressed into service to fulfill some prophecy. Even the treachery and death of Judas are used for this purpose. Acts 1:16-20.

accepted, not imitated. There is no reference to any doctrine of personal devotion to or affection for Jesus. No great ethical demands are made. The ethical monotheism which looms so large in the Pauline letters, if present here at all, is implicit rather than explicit. There is not even any description of the Kingdom, nor teaching about it such as we have in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in the gospels. We shall see later[51] how strikingly this brevity and simplicity of the message fits in with certain historical circumstances.

---

[51] Chapter IV, *infra*.

CHAPTER III

EVIDENCE FROM EARLIER NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS

While the first half of the book of Acts gives an account of some of the events in the period with which we are concerned, it is itself a later composition than many other parts of the New Testament. We must, therefore, take account of the evidence offered in the earlier New Testament writings, and use that evidence to check and correct the conclusions we draw from a study of the first chapters of Acts. We find our most valuable evidence in the Synoptic Gospels and in the earliest epistles of Paul.

The value of the Synoptic Gospels for this investigation. It has long been recognized that the gospel of Matthew, for example, was written for an apologetic purpose, and is not what one might call unbiassed history. In recent years, critics of the Formgeschichte school, and others, have been occupied with showing us that that is true of all the gospels. As Dibelius puts it,

> The first understanding afforded by the standpoint of Formgeschichte is that there never was a "purely" historical witness to Jesus. Whatever was told of Jesus' words and deeds was always a testimony of faith as formulated for preaching and exhortation in order to convert unbelievers and confirm the faithful. What founded

> Christianity was not knowledge about a historical process, but the confidence that the content of the story was salvation; the decisive beginning of the End.[52]

When it comes to a study of the events of Jesus' life, that characteristic of the gospels is a handicap, but for our purposes in this investigation the gospels become more valuable because of their apologetic purpose. "The fact that the Church came to accept the Four Gospels is a proof that each of these works satisfied in a general way the church's requirements."[53] If these gospels were largely compiled, as seems likely, from traditions that were current in the church and that had been preserved because of their apologetic value, we can find in them a good indication of what the early church regarded as the essential message.

This will not necessarily constitute the bulk of the material in the Gospels; just as we found that the speeches in Acts had a simple message, which could be stated very briefly, but which was the raison d'etre of whatever other material was included, so we shall find certain key sentences in the gospels which indicate the meaning of the whole.[54] We can indeed understand the Synoptics much better when we see them almost as

---

[52]Dibelius, op. cit., p. 295.

[53]Burkitt, op. cit., p. 263.

[54]Compare, e. g., Acts 2:36 with Mark 1:1 and with John 20:31.

booklets of illustrative material for early preachers. Certainly, it will be clear to any one that no stories of Jesus' deeds or words would be likely to be preserved which had no apologetic or homiletic value. "The Gospel stories have received their form as parts of the earliest Christian preaching,"[55] and must therefore be of value to us in determining what was the essential message of that preaching.

Evidence from the Gospel of Mark. We have made no particular mention of the Fourth Gospel, because scholars are generally agreed that it comes from a much later date than the others. Of the Synoptics, it is evident that Mark is earliest, and that Matthew and Luke are to a greater or less degree built upon Mark. In attempting to discover, then, what was the earliest Christian message, the best evidence we can find in the Synoptics will be in Mark.

Mark was formerly considered to be the one Gospel in

---

[55] Easton, op. cit., p. 32. Dibelius says:". . . missionary purpose was the cause and preaching was the means of spreading abroad that which the disciples of Jesus possessed as recollections." (From Tradition to Gospel, p. 13.) This is the emphasis of the Formgeschichte school, and I see no reason to disagree with it. Lightfoot says: "The motive which led to their circulation was not so much desire for historical reminiscence as the need for representative and significant sayings and deeds of the Lord, which could be used in preaching, teaching and worship, the gospel being presented, in each of these three ways, primarily as a message of salvation." (History and Interpretation in the Gospels, p. 126.)

which theological purpose played no part, but at the present time the "tendency is to ascribe to this gospel a definite doctrinal background."[56] Mark 1:1 is believed to give not only the title but the purpose of the book. Certainly, throughout the Gospel of Mark incidents and sayings all seem pointed toward proving the Messiahship of Jesus. He comes preaching "the kingdom of God is at hand,"[57] as the Messiah should do; the man with an unclean spirit calls out, "I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God,"[58] which Jesus does not deny; he forgives sins and calls himself "son of man" while doing so;[59] unclean spirits fall down before him, exclaiming, "Thou art the Son of God;" he stills the waves of the sea, at which phenomenon the disciples wonderingly ask, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"[60] So it goes throughout the Gospel--there is a continual succession of incidents which seem designed to show that this Jesus of Nazareth is a supernatural being, even Son of God and Messiah.[61]

---

[56] Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 25.

[57] Mark 1:15.

[58] Mark 1:24.

[59] Mark 2:11.

[60] Mark 4:41.

[61] Mark 5:7, 19-20; 6:2-3; 8:27-30; 9:1, 2-8, 11-13; and so on.

It is significant that the earliest of the Gospels shows this definite doctrinal or apologetic trend. If we date it somewhere around the end of the seventh decade, we have good evidence that the Christian message, within less than forty years after the Crucifixion, was a message about the Messiah. But we can go farther back than that. Lightfoot says of the Gospel of Mark,

> We are now bidden to see in it a compilation of materials of different date, origin, character and purpose, many of which may have had a considerable history--whether oral or literary or both--before they were finally inserted in this gospel, at least a large part of the book being formed from anonymous traditions which had long been current in the church.[62]

Aside from the use which the evangelist makes of them, many of the incidents which he incorporates from this ancient tradition show by their very form and substance that they owed their original preservation to their evidential value. The moral--"Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Messian now come"--is not merely tacked on, but is an integral part of such incidents as the first encounter with an unclean spirit, in 1:23-27. In the first chapter of his book, From Tradition to Gospel, Dibelius takes up in detail some of the fragments in Mark which seem most probably to be bits of primitive sermons, and shows in a comprehensive way, for which there would not be room in such a

---

[62] Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 25.

paper as this, how each one received its form and was preserved as testimony to the Messiahship of Jesus.[63]

This means, then, that the very first followers who told any stories about Jesus at all, the nameless beginners of these various "paradigms" or blocks of tradition, had as their own motive the supporting of the Messianic claim for Jesus. But many of the stories must have been started by eye-witnesses, and very many would have received their form at least in the decade with which we are particularly concerned, the first decade after the Crucifixion. Indeed, they are the only kind of incidents that would be eagerly told and retold among the Christians during those early years. But this leads us to a line of argument which will be taken up more fully in a later section, on "The Making of Christians;" it is enough to say here that all historical indications point to a primitive gospel which was essentially a piece of good news about something that had happened or was going to happen, not the exposition of a new religious system.

Another point of significance in the Gospel of Mark, as in all the others, is the disproportionately large part which the Passion narrative occupies. Six out of sixteen chapters

---

[63] E. F. Scott, in The Gospel and Its Tributaries, p. 59, says: "Our Gospels rightly accentuate his claim to be Messiah, for it is only in view of it that his message and the story of his life can be rightly interpreted."

in Mark deal with the Triumphal Entry and subsequent events. Dibelius says:

> All the observations and conclusions which we can put forward, in fact, prove that the primitive Christian missionaries did not relate the life of Jesus, but proclaimed the salvation which had come about in Jesus Christ. What they narrated was secondary to this proclamation, was intended to confirm it and to found it. . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> If what was preached was a witness of salvation, then, among all the materials which were related, only this one, the Passion, was of real significance in the message. For what it dealt with was the first act of the end of the world as then believed and hoped. Here salvation was visible not only in the person and the word of the Lord, but also in the succession of a number of events.[64]

That is to say, the comparatively large space given to the passion and resurrection indicates that the interest was primarily in the Messiah, bringer of the Kingdom and salvation, rather than in the teacher or the personal Master. This is not so true of the later Gospels, though they too give a great deal of space to the Passion. But Matthew shows a much greater interest in the Teacher, and John in the living Christ, than does Mark. Dibelius has a phrase which expresses as clearly as any the attitude of the Second Gospel toward the events which it records: "The Christians were in this manner . . . reminded of that piece of history which guaranteed their salvation."[65]

If it be remembered, now, that this Gospel was written

---

[64] Dibelius, op. cit., pp. 15, 23.

[65] Op. cit., p. 21.

after Paul's life and letters, it becomes the more surprising that the primitive flavor is so well preserved. It is no less than amazing that a man writing after the time of Paul should still have an interest in "Jesus after the flesh," and that he should preserve and record the primitive anecdotes with so little editing.[66] It goes far to show how firmly fixed in the memories and in the respect of the early Christians were these traditional tales of Jesus, that they were able to persist through all the doctrinal controversy and mystical speculation. As Scott declares,

> It appears strange at first sight that Mark, our earliest Gospel, only deals with the teaching incidentally. Was it that this evangelist was ignorant of the sayings or knew them in some imperfect version, or failed to perceive their value? The true reason is, we can hardly doubt, that he was faithful to the earliest tradition of the Church.[67]

Apparently, then, Jesus himself, his person, his deeds, and even his words all take their importance, in the stream of tradition used by Mark, from their relation to his coming as Messiah, which in turn derives its value from the fact that it portends the coming of the Kingdom, and salvation for those who believe. There is, so far as we can see, no contradiction

---

[66] Foakes-Jackson, in Studies in the Life of the Early Church, p. 50, says: "The fact that the Synoptic picture of Jesus on earth should have been preserved is truly remarkable, especially when it is considered how little impression it made in the Christian literature of the first centuries."

[67] Scott, op. cit., p. 63.

between the picture of the earliest church in the book of Acts and that to be deduced from the Gospel of Mark. In fact, it is possible to see that the whole Gospel is built upon much the same general scheme and theme as the speeches of Peter in Acts. "It is a fundamental conviction of the writer that Jesus is Messiah; this forms the writer's gospel. . ."[68] It may be added that the work of Dibelius and others shows that this is also the gospel message as thought of by those anonymous sources, oral or written, from which Mark took most of his material.

The value of the Pauline epistles for this investigation. The most striking piece of evidence in the Pauline epistles is their whole general tone and method. They are, of course, earlier than any of the other New Testament writings. But instead of being more closely concerned with the historical Jesus on that account, as we might expect, they seem to fit more closely in the thought world of, say, the Fourth Gospel. They are mystical and speculative to a surprising extent. There may be several reasons for this phenomenon. Paul was obviously a man of great intellectual power, a theological genius who would leave his own stamp upon any gospel that was transmitted

---

[68] Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 102. Earlier, he says: "[Jesus] is put before us from the beginning as the Christ, the Son of God: . . . This was the conviction and the doctrine of the church for which the evangelist wrote, and it gives the keynote to his gospel." (Pp. 66-67.)

through him. Besides that, he was apparently not in touch with the movement during the lifetime of Jesus, and would not have the vivid memories of the earthly Jesus that others had. Then we must also consider the way in which Paul himself was converted, which would give him a mystical tendency in his interpretations thereafter.

But, making all the allowances we can, it still seems strange that the parts of the New Testament written the soonest after the Crucifixion should have the least to say about the life and teachings of Jesus, and should find their theological affinity in a gospel written perhaps seventy years after the event. Even if we could account for Paul's personal theological bent, we should have to notice that he does not apologize for his general approach, nor seem to think that he is preaching a strange gospel. From his letters, one would assume that the readers held in general the same positions as the writer. He lays stress on the fact that he preaches no "new" gospel, but simply hands on to them what has been given to him.[69] Dibelius says,

> The repetition of message in the course of preaching in Acts, and the assurance which Paul gives that he himself had received such a message, show that in the handing down of the message we are dealing with a widespread custom of Christian missionaries and preachers.[70]

---

[69] 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3, and especially 11.

[70] Dibelius, op. cit., p. 21.

Here we have an intimation that greatly enhances the value of Paul's letters for our investigation. If he really is carrying to his converts a central message in much the same way as that which seems to be the missionary method in Acts, we have first-hand evidence not only of what Paul preached, but of what was being preached in the Christian community before his conversion. If he had been the innovator he is sometimes suspected of being, the Twelve or some other persons who had preceded him in the faith would soon have made a fuss about it. We have no record of any accusation that Paul has changed the gospel, in its essential message, though there was plenty of controversy over peripheral matters. Bacon says: "Paul's gospel and that of the Galilean apostles were as wide apart as contemporary gospels could possibly be. But in one point they came together."[71] That point was , in Bacon's view, the resurrection of Jesus, God's vindication of him as Messiah. Zenos, similarly, says:

> "Jesus is the Messiah," and "God raised him from the dead," became twin and inseparable articles in the first creed (if the expression may be allowed) of the primitive Christian community. Paul was expressing neither an individual belief nor a thought original with himself when he later put it to the Corinthians, "If Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching vain; your faith is also vain."[72]

---

[71] Bacon, op. cit., p. 22.

[72] Andrew C. Zenos, The Plastic Age of the Gospel, pp. 120-121.

Schweitzer, Scott, and Bulcock, among others, agree in saying that Paul's essential message was derived from the tradition, not original with him.[73]

It is true, of course, that when Paul got out into the field, working and thinking and praying, he greatly elaborated the simple message he had received, and thought out many implications which had never occurred to the simpler minds who preceded him. It is a far cry from Thessalonians to Romans, and even farther if you take some of the speeches in Acts as the starting point. But just because we can see this theological development as we trace Paul's thought through his letters, the earliest letters are of great importance to us, for in them we get the closest view of the faith of the earliest disciples. It is true that in all of Paul's letters we have his gospel in a somewhat elaborated form. At a conservative estimate, fifteen years elapsed between his conversion and the writing of First Thessalonians, during most of which time he was occupied with preaching and teaching, and with thinking out more thoroughly the implications of his new faith.

We must reckon also with the fact that Paul, during most of his ministry, was dealing with and preaching to Gentiles. We

---

[73] Bulcock, op. cit., p. 210.
Scott, The First Age of Christianity, p. 157.
Albert Schweitzer, The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle, pp. 61-62.

find in his epistles many elements of doctrine which it would not have been necessary to emphasize to a group of Jewish-Christians. In fact, the process of becoming a Christian would be quite a different thing to his Gentile converts from what it had been to him. For example, he had no need to be converted to a monotheistic faith, but they had. If we would gather evidence as to the original gospel, we must take Paul's earliest letters, try to make allowances for a certain amount of the same trend to mysticism and elaboration of doctrine which shows so plainly in the difference between Thessalonians and the later letters (that is to say, in the fifteen years preceding the writing of Thessalonians, a process must have gone on in Paul's thinking similar to the process which we know went on in the fifteen years following A. D. 49), make allowance also for the fact that the original gospel was a message to Jews instead of Gentiles, and thus try to discover what lay fifteen years behind the letter.

Evidence from the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians. Paul, in First Thessalonians, "presents his ideas of the future in a clearer light, and takes occasion to impress anew upon his readers the truths of the gospel as he had proclaimed them."[74] The fact that he was writing to a church but recently founded,

---

[74] Scott, op. cit., p. 135.

and only sketchily instructed in the new faith, makes it all the more likely that we can find here genuine hints as to what Paul considered to be his real gospel.

> As a summary of Paul's missionary message 1 Thessalonians is especially valuable. The writer felt called upon to recapitulate the gospel that he had preached at Thessalonica. Therefore we may secure from the letter some idea of what his missionary message to a Gentile congregation must have been. No doubt he fed them, as he did the Corinthians, with milk, not with solid food (1 Cor. 3[1f]). An ethical monotheism, with emphasis on the wrath to come and Christ as the Saviour from that wrath, the present gift of the Spirit, a demand for moral living, the future coming of Christ--these seem to have been the burden of his preaching.[75]

In the first chapter, after writing a brief greeting, Paul proceeds to rehearse in outline, in the form of a thanksgiving, his coming to the Thessalonians and their acceptance of the gospel, together with their "work of faith and labor of love and patience" which resulted. There are frequent references in this first chapter to "the word," "our gospel," "your faith," and so on; seemingly verses 9 and 10 constitute the definition of what Paul means by these various general phrases.

> For they themselves report concerning us what manner of entering in we had unto you; and how ye turned from idols unto God, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivereth us from the wrath to come.

In these two verses we eliminate for our purposes the

---

[75] C. C. McCown, The Abingdon Commentary, p. 1264b.

reference to the substitution of monotheism for idolatry, since that can hardly have had any part in the original gospel. We find four essential points in the remainder of the sentence: (1) the apocalyptic expectation of God's "Son from heaven," (2) the central fact of the resurrection, the significance of which is not stated, but which seems to be used here as elsewhere in the sense of a vindication and validation of the Messianic claim, (3) the identification of the historical Jesus of Nazareth as the One to be expected and awaited, and (4) the deliverance of believers from "the wrath to come." Putting these in logical order, we find this message: Jesus of Nazareth, whom God raised from the dead, is Son of God and coming Messiah, and through him we have salvation in the time of future wrath. This is the earliest statement we have, from Paul himself, of what was the essence of his message.

It is evident, from a perusal of the other letters, that Paul's mind worked this message through and elaborated it into the vast scheme of doctrine known as Pauline theology, and added to it various practical considerations of such things as church organization and administration, liturgics, morals, and customs. The fact that the historic Jesus was the one designated as the expected Messiah was the one thing which made it possible for Paul to continue a flaming apostle and for the church to grow in numbers and strength on through the years

when the apocalyptic hope, which played such a large part at first, was being weakened and neglected because the Coming was so long delayed. We shall have more to say of this in a later section of the thesis. It is sufficient to say here that two factors--the working of Paul's mind and the historical development of events--produced the elaboration of this simple gospel formula into the complexity of the later letters.

What was the difference between this view and that of orthodox Judaism? Did not both look for the coming of the Messiah, who would bring in the promised Kingdom and save his people from future destruction? The difference lay in the fact that Paul and the other Christians declared they knew <u>who</u> this Messiah was, and that he had already appeared on earth in the form of a natural man, Jesus of Nazareth. It made all the difference in the world, that they had the historic figure of Jesus, with Jesus' words and deeds, to color their conception of the Messiah and his kingdom. All good Jews believed in the Messiah and the kingdom--the question was "<u>What kind</u> of Messiah and <u>what kind</u> of Kingdom?" Also bound up with that, as Paul began to realize, was the question of what kind of life was appropriate in followers of Jesus Messiah. The historicity of Jesus, far from being an alternative in opposition to the mystical doctrines of Paul, was the one fact which made possible his great system of Christ-mysticism. Messiah-mysticism based

purely on the legendary and speculative figure of a hoped-for Messiah, about whose person no one knew anything, could be nothing other than dry-as-dust philosophy, without moral power or emotional vitality. The beginnings of the ethical note are found in 1:6, "ye became imitators of us and of the Lord."

In chapter two, there are many references to "the gospel of God" (verses 2, 4 8, 9, 13), without much explanation of what it involves. Here, as elsewhere, the gospel is presented as something to be believed (verse 10, etc.); the ethical note comes in as an implication, not as the primary proposition. Verse 12 gives very clearly the relation of all Paul's ethical exhortations to his fundamental message: "To the end that ye should walk worthily of God, who calleth you into his own kingdom and glory." Verses 16 and 19 look forward to the second coming of Christ, as the consummation toward which all striving aspires.

Chapter three, verse 8, is sometimes expounded as if it were a hope that the Thessalonians continue to live blameless Christian lives. There can be no doubt, from verses 2 and 3, that the "standing fast" consists of still believing. Tribulation and persecution have arisen, and there is danger that affliction may lead the new disciples to think their faith a mistaken one. Paul takes occasion to remind them that he had told them affliction was part of the whole plan, and to point out

that it so came to pass. The fact of this affliction is the occasion for "the tempter" (verse 5). 3:13 looks forward again to the coming of Christ.

The ethical exhortations in 4:1-12 are introduced with a "finally, then," and read like affectionate advice and admonitions rather than the essence of the gospel. The keynote of the whole is given in verses 11-12:

> and that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your hands, even as we charged you; that ye may walk becomingly toward them that are without, and may have need of nothing.

This is advice to a newly formed group, on how best to get along in a hostile world and to obtain a good reputation, rather than a statement of cardinal belief. The exhortations to sanctification are on a par with the desire expressed in 2:12, "that ye should walk worthily of God."

In 4:13-18 Paul deals with the concern which has arisen in Thessalonica over the disciples who have passed on before the expected Coming. Two things are to be noticed here: he uses as a basis of argument the belief that Jesus died and rose again, which fact shows how central that belief must have been; and the prominence of the apocalyptic element is shown by the very fact that this question arose, and that Paul answered it not by saying that it did not matter, but by seriously giving as specific information as he could about what would happen in that day.

The ethical note comes in again in chapter 5, where the moral life expected of Christians is grounded on two considerations: (1) in verses 6-8 and 23, the thought is that one lives the best one can in order to be ready for the last day, which may come at any time; and (2) in verse 10 there is a further indication of the elementary Christ-mysticism, which backs the moral life by saying, "We are united with Jesus Christ, we live with him, and must therefore live like him."

All the evidence we have found in First Thessalonians points to the essential authenticity of the summary found in 1:9-10. Since Paul was preaching mainly to Gentiles, he found it necessary to get them to "turn unto God from idols, and to serve a living and true God." But the original message to the Jews would have taken that for grated, and therefore we have this primitive core left: "and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivereth us from the wrath to come." (1:10.)

Second Thessalonians does not stand on quite so sure a footing among scholars as a genuine letter of Paul. "Many sentences in 2 Thessalonians sound almost as if they had been copied, somewhat laboriously and clumsily, from 1 Thessalonians . . . while one whole section which is new is largely a canto of O. T. phrases (1^{8-12})."[76] In 1:3-10 the writer gives thanks

[76] McCown, op. cit., p. 1270a.

for the love and patience and faith of the Thessalonians under persecution, and looks forward to the time when their enemies shall be afflicted in punishment for their afflictions of the Christians. This is to be "when he shall come to be glorified in his saints. . . " (1:10). He deals again, in chapter two, with the question of "the day of the Lord," cautioning them now not to expect it too soon. While we are not interested in the detailed statements he gives, in this thesis, we do find it significant that this subject has such a prominent place. It is the day of the Lord that they are talking about and thinking about, and that gives point to the very existence of a Christian community as such.

In chapter three he returns to the problem of those who "walk disorderly." In spite of the first impression given by 3:6 that "the tradition," and therefore the gospel, consisted of moral principles, the whole tone of 3:6-15 is that of one who gives advice on how Christians should best conduct themselves for the sake of order and respectability, not that of a man who reiterates the proclamation of the central truth of his gospel. "Count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." (3:15.) In this letter, apostasy consists in giving up hope and faith, not in walking disorderly.

The later epistles. The questions of how, why, when,

for whom, and for what, were continually presenting themselves to Paul and his converts as the years passed. He dealt with the questions as they arose, and elaborated his gospel to meet them. He worked out implications that probably would have seemed fantastic to him at first, but always he worked from this central core of message with which he started, plus the Christian experience he was having. So we find in the later epistles much advice on many subjects, but the continual assumption that the resurrection of Jesus, his present Lordship and future coming, constitute the Christian message. Romans 10:9 sums it up this way: "if thou shalt confess with tny mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." Denney comments on this: "The exaltation of Jesus is the fundamental Christian confession, and presupposes the resurrection; and it is this exaltation which here . . . is meant by His Lordship."[77] Bulcock declares:

> In Gentile circles the name Kyrios would be a suitble equivalent for such a Jewish technical term as 'Son of Man' (that is, the Enochian apocalyptic Messiah), and it is significant that in St. Paul's writings the title 'Son of Man' has completely disappeared. But the term Kyrios comes into prominence. . . .[78]

---

[77] James Denney, The Expositor's Greek Testament, vol. II, p. 671.

[78] Bulcock, op. cit., p. 208.

Bacon believes[79] that such passages as Romans 10:9, 2 Corinthians 4:5-6, and 1 Corinthians 12:3 "prove that Paul attached to this confession of 'Jesus is LORD' a fundamental significance."

Summary. It is evident that the earlier New Testament writings in general confirm the impression of the primitive message which we gain from the book of Acts: that the first preaching centered in the risen Christ, as the coming Messiah who would bring in the long-awaited kingdom, which meant salvation for those who accepted Him. We have seen that the idea of belonging to Jesus as Christ was elaborated by Paul into a Christ-mysticism. History has shown this mystico-personal relationship of the individual to Christ to be a more fruitful and enduring doctrine than the early message out of which it grew. Mark, as the earliest gospel, shows both that the writer of it meant to prove and assert the Messiahship of Jesus and the future salvation which he would bring, and also that the nameless sponsors and early re-tellers of his fragmentary source-stories seem likewise to have meant their stories to preach essentially the same thing. Paul makes, in his earliest extant letter, a definite, concise statement of his message, which in no way conflicts with evidence previously examined.

---

[79] Bacon, The Founding of the Church, pp. 48-49.

CHAPTER IV

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL FACTORS

The answer we give to the question, "What was the message of the earliest Christians?" must be an answer that is not only in keeping with the earliest records we have, but is also consistent with the whole historical situation. There are a number of striking phenomena in the early history of Christianity which our answer must account for. The earliest Christian message must be, that is, a message which is understandable as arising in the historical situation in which we know it did arise, and as developing into the doctrines and emphases into which we know it did develop. In this chapter we shall discuss some of the significant historical factors which our ultimate answer must take into account.

The relation of Christianity to Judaism. The first and most obvious consideration is that Christianity originated among the Jews, and was built upon the foundation of Judaism. It is always assumed, and rightly so, that whatever Jesus and his disciples said or taught, they spoke always with the Jewish religion as their axiomatic background. The assertion that Jesus was the Messiah is meaningless without that assumption. We

have considered this factor in this thesis in dealing with Paul's summary of the message in 1 Thessalonians. We justified the discarding of the part which inculcated monotheism, on the ground that that would have been assumed by those who first bore witness to the gospel, because they were Jews. It could not form part of a "new" message.

There are men, to be sure, who hold the view of Arnold, that there is a vast difference between Jesus' message and that of the disciples after his death, and that whatever is in addition to Judaism comes from them rather than from him. "The Gospel was to Jesus the Essence of Judaism," says Arnold,[80] and later he says:

> [Jesus' message] was in form a reply to the great religious question of the day: Is there a kingdom of God? When will it appear? And what shall the individual Israelite do to prepare for it--if not to hasten it? . . . And his message was preached not as a new faith with new conceptions and terminology; rather did his message appear, we may say, incidentally in the course of his discussion of the questions of the day.[81]

The question of whether, or how far, the disciples' "gospel" was the same as that of Jesus, will be dealt with in a later section of the thesis. But whether Arnold here makes too strong

---

[80] William R. Arnold, "The Relation of Primitive Christianity to Jewish Thought and Teaching," Harvard Theological Review, XXIII, 3, p. 162.

[81] Op. cit., pp. 170-171.

a statement or not, it seems clear that both Jesus and his disciples did believe that they were not destroying but fulfilling the Jewish law and religion. Whatever they preached, and whatever their opponents may have thought about it, they themselves thought within the framework of Judaism at the beginning. One scholar says explicitly that the Christian church "was at first a small sect of Jews, whose existence was hardly recognized in the larger community of Israel with its various sects and parties."[82] Such men as Scott would dispute this somewhat extreme view, and say: "Notwithstanding its intimate relation with the parent religion, there never was a time when the church was a mere sect of Judaism."[83] "The church was not merely the new Israel but the community of those who looked forward to the Kingdom and who would inherit it."[84]

Perhaps this is merely quibbling about the word "sect," and is unnecessary for our purposes here. While some would say that Paul borrowed many of his ideas from the mystery religions, there are few scholars who would question the statement that in its first origin, among Jesus and the disciples, Christianity was built upon Judaism. As Symes puts it:

---

[82]Foakes-Jackson, op. cit., p. 11. On p. 23 he says: "Even after the great war, Justin Martyr as a Christian and Trypho the Jew dispute amicably about prophecy."

[83]Scott, The Beginnings of the Church, p. 273.

[84]Scott, The Gospel and Its Tributaries, p. 82.

> The early Christians were, in short, a sect or guild of Jews who had added to Judaism certain new elements, especially the belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah; that He had risen from the dead; and that He would shortly return to judge the world.[85]

Not only is Christianity built in a general way upon Judaism, but we must reckon with the important part played by one item of Judaism--the expectation of the Messianic kingdom. The accusations against Jesus, the charges of blasphemy against his disciples, the frequent references in our records to Messianic claims, the citation of Messianic prophecies, and the whole drift of the Christian movement show conclusively that some statement about the Messiah and his kingdom must have been central in the Christian message from the very first.

The second aspect of the relation of Christianity to Judaism is the fact that in spite of their close relation historically speaking, the Christian church became very soon an essentially Gentile church, and the leaders of the Jewish religion became the fiercest of opponents. Saul of Tarsus, "a Pharisee of the Pharisees," had nothing but hostility toward the new movement. We cannot explain the fierceness of the opposition on any assumption that Jesus and his disciples attempted merely an ethical purification of the contemporary Jewish religion. There must have been something else in the Christian message to provoke such bitterness. We will get at it by asking, What

---

[85] Symes, The Evolution of the New Testament, p. 2.

happened to Paul on the Damascus road, and what difference did it make in his thought and in his life?

Saul, as a good Pharisee, was orthodox to the core. He needed no Damascus road to convert him to monotheism, the Ten Commandments, prayer, or even the expectation of a divine Messiah who should bring in the Kingdom. No, there was chiefly one thing in the Christian creed that would offend him, and that was the assertion that the Messiah had already come, been rejected, and had been executed like any common criminal.[86] What happened at his conversion? No new insights into morality, not even a new revelation of God, but rather the mere vision of Jesus as still alive was what made the difference in his life. A sudden blinding flash, or a voice, or both--and Paul is convinced that he is in the presence of something supernatural. Wonderingly and in awe he queries, "Who art thou, Lord?" And the answer, "I am Jesus," is sufficient to redirect the whole course of his life. This is a very important point. On the assumption that the earliest Christian message was a new ethical monotheism, or a doctrine of present, ethical salvation in the modern sense, or even a personal devotion to Jesus springing from long acquaintance and deepening affection, the whole story of the conversion of Saul is dark with mystery. Even such

---

[86]Is it not likely that 1 Cor. 1:23 refers to Paul's own previous intellectual difficulties with the Cross?

passages as Romans 7, while they present very movingly some of of the effects and values of Saul's conversion, do not seem to describe an adequate cause for his having made the change from opposition and persecution to espousal and apostleship. But on the assumption that the core of the message was the assertion that Jesus of Nazareth is to be revealed as Messianic Lord, even the Jesus whom the authorities condemned and killed, all is made plain. Believing Jesus' Messianic claims preposterous and blasphemous, Saul had depended on the "hard fact" that God would never have allowed the Messiah to be killed. Now, suddenly, he has an experience of the supernatural, in which he actually meets and is spoken to by the Jesus upon whose deadness he had built his whole defense against Christianity. If Jesus can blind him, and then speak to him, the central position of the Christians is incontrovertibly established--God has raised Jesus from the dead, Jesus is alive, and it is reasonable to assume that this means God has completely vindicated him and his claims, declaring him really to be the Messiah.

This whole experience, as presented above, helps us to understand the surprisingly bitter opposition which Christianity encountered in the house of its parent religion. The preaching of Jesus as risen Messiah was either the most wonderful truth of God or the rankest blasphemy. No wonder those who stayed outside the Christian movement were so inclined to

persecution.

That the resurrection of Jesus was so central is very strikingly indicated by the question which Paul inserts in his address to King Agrippa (Acts 26:8), "Why is it judged incredible with you, if God doth raise the dead?" Here the assumption is that the only obstacle to Christian faith is doubt whether Jesus really could have been raised from the dead, and that if that resurrection be granted, the main contention of the Christians is established.

We must be sure, likewise, that our summary of the earliest Christian message takes cognizance of the Jewish tendency to think in terms of the group or the nation, rather than of the individual. Their emphasis and their expectation were bound up with a social solidarity and social salvation which were quite different from the conceptions of Greeks of that day, or of Americans of this day. In their traditions, God is represented as dealing for the most part with the nation rather than the individual. Even the great promise of the New Covenant, in Jeremiah 31, while speaking of God's writing his law in their hearts, still emphasizes the fact that it is with "Israel" that the covenant shall be made. Foakes-Jackson has clearly distinguished the Jewish and the Greek expectations which the Gospel satisfied:

> Paul hit the mark exactly when he said, 'The Jews

> seek a sign and the Greeks seek after wisdom.' The people, trained in the old dispensation, were always expecting a supernatural deliverance, not so much of individuals as of the nation. . . . In accepting Jesus as Messiah, they expected in Him an immediate deliverer. His Resurrection was a sign, a sure proof that He would come in glory as the judge and vindicator of the Israel of God. . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> But the Greek had been brought up amid no Messianic hopes; . . . What he wanted was personal salvation by enlightenment. He desired that his nature should undergo a change, that he as an individual should become immortal and be transformed into another man by a divine spirit. . . . Thus Gentile Christianity became more and more sacramental in its character and was organized accordingly.[87]

It goes without saying that the gospel which was preached to and by Jews in the early days, and which did in fact win many Jews, must in some measure have met the Jewish expectation. Since it spoke of salvation through belonging to the coming Kingdom, Paul was able to take it and recast it into a more individualistic, sacramental message by emphasizing the change that came about in an individual when he became a member of the kingdom. From that, it was but a short step to the emphasis upon a personal relationship between the individual Christian and his Lord. The koinonia received its significance, for Greek minds, from the Lord Christ with whom it brought one into fellowship. But surely, in its original Jewish form, the message must have been more social than personal, even though we grant that the movement toward a more individualistic gospel

---

[87] Foakes-Jackson, Studies in the Life of the Early Church, pp. 34-35.

may have begun almost immediately.

As a matter of fact, when there were such striking external events taking place, when people thought the cosmic hour was about to strike, how could any man be very introspective? Even a writer as late as the Fourth Evangelist tells of Nicodemus, who seemed more interested in the question of whether or not Jesus was really sent from God than he was in the question of the new birth. The Jewish background would seem to require that the message have an objectivity and a social emphasis that sometimes are forgotten. Easton says: "the risen Master, as God's Messiah, held an objective place in the religion of even the earliest Christians."[88]

The use of the term "gospel." The word "gospel" has become so familiar that we now use it in many different senses without recognizing that we are shifting our ground. Roberts, for example,[89] distinguishes carefully, as we all ought to do, between preaching and teaching, in the work of Jesus. "The term 'Gospel' did not apply to all that Jesus said and did. It

---

[88] Easton, op. cit., p. 70. The older view, which was good so far as it went but which did not push back quite far enough in the history, is well expressed by Camden M. Cobern, in the Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels, II, 494: The earliest Christians "never attempted to analyze his states of consciousness . . . but of one thing they were absolutely sure, it was He who had worked the mighty change in them. . . . New powers in many directions were theirs. . . ."

[89] In A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels, I, 660.

was reserved for the 'good tidings' that he preached." But then, apparently forgetting the very distinction which he has just made, he goes on to sum up:

> The meaning of the term 'Gospel' as used by Jesus may now be summed up. It seems to describe the message he taught concerning--(a) the fatherly nature of God; (b) the inclusiveness and spirituality of the kingdom: and (c) God's provision for men's deliverance from sin through his own mediation.[90]

Gospel means "good news," of course, and should certainly be understood in that sense where it is used in the New Testament. The idea that some type of theological statement, about the nature of God or the forgiveness of sins or what not, can qualify as news -- such an idea is a comparatively modern conception, springing from a highly figurative use of the term. Least of all are we entitled to assume that those who first used the word "gospel" meant by it the whole scheme of Christianity, as we do now. News, or tidings, is the report of some objective occurrence which has happened or is about to happen. The primitive use of the word is found in Mark 1:15, in the statement of the burden of Jesus' own preaching: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe in the gospel." Mark 8:35-38 and many other similar passages very clearly imply that the "gospel" is the statement of something that is about to happen, as attested by something

---

[90] Op. cit., p. 661.

that has already happened.[91] In Matthew 4:23 the distinction is made between teaching and preaching: "and Jesus went about in Galilee teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing. . .." A similar statement is found in Matthew 9:35, "And Jesus went about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing. . .." Luke 20:1 and other passages make a similar distinction. The Gospel, as such, was not ethical nor theological teaching, but the proclamation of tidings, an announcement, of some objective thing that had happened or was about to happen, or both.

One more point should be noted about the use of this word in the New Testament. So far as the evangelists and Paul give us any indication, they do not understand that gospel on the lips of Jesus meant anything essentially different from what it meant when the first Christians spoke it. The same word was used, and in the same way. But too frequently it has been assumed by modern scholars that there was a fundamental difference, and that the gospel that Jesus preached is insufficient for today, but that the gospel his disciples preached after the resurrection is all-sufficient. But this leads us to the next point.

---

[91] As in Luke 4:43; 7:22; 20;1; Matt. 24:14; Mk. 1:15; 10:29; 13·10; etc.

The relation of the early church to Jesus. When we say here, "the early church," what we really mean is the first Christian community, as it might have been seen during the first year or two after the resurrection of Jesus. Now it is quite clear that that community consisted of the followers whom Jesus had gathered around himself during his lifetime, and whose natural despair after the crucifixion had been turned into triumph when they were assured of the resurrection. It will be equally clear that aside from the new hope, courage, and zeal which this assurance gave them they could not have been very different from what they were before. Certainly there had been no opportunity for them to develop a different message, but rather they would naturally be inspired to take up again the task in which they had already been started by Jesus. When the risen Christ gives his command to go into all the world and preach the gospel (Mark 16:15) he does not trouble to explain what the gospel is. He evidently assumes that they know what he means by the good news, and that all they need is inspiration to carry it abroad. Granted that the authenticity of this passage is open to question, even grave question, still its very presence in our gospel indicates that the church at some very early date must have thought the disciples preached a message which was not new or original with them, but which was in the main derived from the earthly Jesus himself.

But the argument from silence is the really impressive one in this case. As indicated in the preceding section, there is not the slightest evidence anywhere that "gospel" in the mouth of Jesus meant something essentially different from "gospel" in the mouth of post-resurrection Christians. It is true that there is a shift of emphasis, due to the astounding events which have taken place, but this shift does not disturb the central core of the message. All it does is to offer striking validation of the message. Scott says:

> There is no ground, then, for the hypothesis, often assumed as self-evident, that after the death of Jesus his message was practically forgotten and he himself became the one interest of faith. It may be gathered, rather, that personal devotion to Jesus was a later development.[92]

In fact, one of the five points of modification of the traditional view of things, for which Scott argues in his book on The Beginnings of the Church, is that there is no sharp line to be drawn between the teaching of Jesus and that of the early church.[93] He explains:

> The church, if we have rightly understood its original character, was the direct outcome of the work of Jesus. He had foretold the kingdom of God, and had chosen his disciples as the nucleus of the new community that should possess it. After his death they maintained the consciousness of their vocation. They believed that Jesus would shortly return as Messiah to bring in the kingdom, and that they themselves were the destined people of God. . . . This was

---

[92] The Beginnings of the Church, p. 267.

[93] Op. cit., pp. 267-268.

> the constitutive idea of the primitive church, and in the light of it we are able to explain much that would otherwise be dark and unintelligible.[94]

While this particular book of Scott's was written over twenty years ago, he indicates in a recent study that he still holds essentially the same position.[95]

If we are to accept the Synoptic picture of Jesus as more nearly historical than the Johannine, and if we are convinced that there is no sharp line to be drawn between the essential message of Jesus and that of the first Christians, we must conclude that the coming of the Kingdom took precedence in their minds over any sort of personal allegiance to Jesus. Not that both factors were not present, but the personal claims of Jesus derived their significance from what they proved about the coming of the kingdom, rather than the reverse. It is true that as the years went on, and not many years at that, the personal and mystical element grew and developed at the expense of the other. Looking back upon history, we can see and declare that apocalyptic was only the framework in which was built an ethico-mystical faith which eventually burst the framework by outgrowing it; but to a first-decade Christian, who had not the perspective of history to help him, the apocalyptic framework

---

[94] Op. cit., p. 57.

[95] The Gospel and Its Tributaries, p. 77.

was the object of greatest interest. Bulcock declares: "While the real power of this early Church lay in the spiritual and ethical influence of its Master's life of love and sacrifice, its interest was centred upon a Parousial Salvation."[96]

The making of Christians. Easton says that "the Book of Acts certainly reflects the current practice when it describes the baptism of converts with astonishingly little preparation."[97] It is noticeable that when Saul of Tarsus had his experience on the Damascus road, he immediately thought of himself as a Christian, and was baptized apparently without any instruction at all. That a man could become part of a new and strange religious movement in such an instantaneous way is remarkable, if not impossible. How did he know what being a Christian meant? No minister in his senses would receive a known persecutor of Christianity into his church today so quickly and easily. The only explanation seems to be the hypothesis that the essential Christian message in those days was a simple affirmative proposition, as has been indicated by previous evidence offered. The conversion of Saul simply meant that here was a man who had been on one side of a "yes-or-no" question, and had then had an

---

[96] Bulcock, op. cit., p. 213.

[97] Easton, op. cit., p. 79.

experience which led him to take the other side. Everybody knew what it meant to be a Christian, and when Saul became convinced that Jesus was alive and was Messiah, he thereby became a Christian.

The conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch is another instance of conversion which would be hard to explain on any other hypothesis than that of the simple news affirmation of the gospel. (Acts 8:27-38.) Philip, taking advantage of the passage from Isaiah about which the eunuch was puzzled, "preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on the way, they came unto a certain water; and the eunuch saith, Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stand still; and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him." (Acts 8:35-38.) The Greek which is translated here "preached unto him Jesus" is εὐηγγελίσατο αὐτῷ τὸν Ἰησοῦν, which could be more accurately translated "brought good news to him about Jesus." The word "preach" has in our day taken on a moralistic tone which it used not to have. Here again, apparently all that was needed was for the eunuch to recognize the identity of Jesus, and therefore to be baptized as a sign that he was enrolled in the list of "believers." Beyond this fundamental confession of Jesus as Lord and Christ, converts were allowed a great deal of freedom. The history of the church indicates that the early

converts took advantage of that freedom, each one to work out in his own way just what the Christian confession might mean in the way of further implications.

The followers of Jesus were known among themselves by at least three designations--the brethren, the disciples, and the believers. It is interesting that in Acts 19:1-5, when Paul encounters the Ephesian followers of John, the author of Acts calls them simply "certain disciples." "And he said unto them, Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" Obviously, the author regards these men as in some sense Christians, "although they had not yet heard of the coming of the Holy Spirit and knew only the baptism of John."[98] Paul proceeded to supply the deficiency, and after he baptized them "into the name of the Lord Jesus," and laid his hands upon them, they received the Spirit and spoke with tongues. But Paul did not, so far as we can see, make them disciples--they were already disciples, or believers. Now so far as we know the message of John, it was very simple: "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."[99] If it was by reason of their belief that the kingdom was about to dawn that Luke called them "disciples" and spoke of their having "believed," then all Paul could add to them

---

[98] Scott, The First Age of Christianity, p. 167.

[99] Matthew 3:2.

would be the identification of the designated Messiah who was actually to bring in the kingdom, and the information that those who were baptized could have this strange phenomenon known as "the Spirit" to be a sign of their acceptance for the kingdom. But they were already "disciples," -- they had previously come to the place where they"believed."

The place of the resurrection of Jesus. It is trite to say that the resurrection of Jesus changed the disciples from a defeated, discouraged, and scattered group of fishermen to a close-knit ecclesia of fearless apostles. The transformation even as we read about it, however, is nothing less than marvellous. We have pointed out the essential continuity of the message of Jesus with that of the early church, but we give only one side of the picture if we do not recognize that some new factor entered in after the resurrection which revitalized the whole movement. All Jesus' life and teaching, in all probability, would have been forgotten if nothing had happened to call discouraged Peter back from his dejected resolve to "go a-fishing." We must reckon with the prominent place occupied by the Resurrection.

The explanation of the significance of the resurrection of Jesus is fairly familiar to nearly everyone. Very few would question the statement that Jesus, at least in the last few

weeks of his life, laid claim to being the promised Messiah; he may have thought that he was rather the individual who had been selected to be Messiah when the Kingdom should actually come, but Messianic claims were in his mind in some form. His disciples shared his expectations, in some degree at least. Then came the crucifixion, contrary to all their hopes and expectations, if not to his; it proved to them as well as to the people looking on that his message had been mistaken, that he could not possibly be Messiah, and the Kingdom was still a vague and pious hope instead of an imminent reality. The glory of the resurrection was that it vindicated what had seemed to be a lost cause, and showed that God had indeed declared him to be "both Lord and Christ." The vital hope of the kingdom returned with the vindication of the Messiah who had proclaimed it and would presently establish it. The "church was created, if we look only to its immediate origin, by the belief that Christ had risen."[100] But, says Scott, it is an error to assume that the surprise of the resurrection half obliterated memory of and interest in the words and deeds of the historical Jesus. Rather, his own predictions of death and resurrection, remembered after the event, were what gave Messianic significance to it.

> Jesus had taught that the kingdom was at hand, that he himself was the destined Messiah who would bring it in,

---

[100] Scott, The Beginnings of the Church, p. 259.

> that through death he would be exalted to his Messianic office. The resurrection was evidence to the disciples that all had happened as he had foretold. He had now attained to the Messiahship; yet a little time and he would return in power to inaugurate the kingdom.[101]

Right through the early years, we find indications that the cross was indeed "unto Jews a stumbling block." It had been a stumbling block first of all to the original disciples themselves. It was only natural that the first preaching should center around the event that had shown the stumbling block to be "the power of God," -- the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. The one bone of contention between believers and non-believers was whether or not Jesus had been raised, and was actually the designated Messiah who would presently, if not immediately, bring in the kingdom.

The seeming objectivity of the gift of the Spirit. We are so accustomed to thinking of "the Spirit" as something intangible and highly subjective, that it is difficult for us to think with the first century Christians on this point. Streeter says:

> . . . the most vivid fact of present experience was the outpouring of 'the Spirit.' To the individual Christian something had happened--something so obvious that it could be pointed to as evidence of something else. 'Received

---

[101] Op. cit., p. 260.

> ye the spirit (says St. Paul) by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?' (Gal. iii. 2), as if the reception of the Spirit was something as definite and observable as, for example, an attack of influenza.[102]

Peter in his first sermon referred to the gift of the Holy Spirit as "this, which ye see and hear."[103] In Acts 8:18 we read: "Now when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given . . .". Apparently there were in existence Christians who had been baptized into "the name of the Lord Jesus," but upon whom the Spirit had not come.[104] But it was quite clearly observable when it did come upon them; probably the most common manifestation everywhere, as at the time of Pentecost, was glossalaly.

Here is a strange situation: Jesus had not talked "in tongues," nor had any of his disciples during his lifetime; he had in all probability said nothing about it; from Paul's advice to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14:2ff) we gather that glossalaly involved chiefly meaningless sounds, which of themselves could certainly not be any indication of God; and yet through the early years much stress was laid on the Holy Spirit, usually in this highly objective sense, by the major portion of the Christian community. The best explanation would seem to be

---

[102] Streeter, The Primitive Church, p. 73.

[103] Acts 2:33.

[104] Acts 8:16.

found in the prophetic and Messianic traditions of the past. In the time of Saul, son of Kish, there had been roving bands of "God-possessed" prophets, who were somewhat looked down on by ordinary well-balanced people.[105] Besides, we cannot overlook the eschatological prophecy in Joel, of which Peter made such good use on the day of Pentecost.[106] It has been pointed out that the gift of the Spirit which is so prominent in Acts I-XII is very seldom mentioned in Acts XIII-XXVIII. Are we not entitled to assume that a strange psychological seizure which came upon the disciples at first under the stress of great emotion was immediately interpreted as another sign of the nearness of the End, and that as the years went on the barrenness of the whole performance became apparent[107] and the emphasis was shifted?

The gift of the Spirit, in this startlingly objective form, was valued not for itself but because it bore additional witness to the nearness of the kingdom and hence to the Messiahship of Jesus. "The coming of the Spirit is used to prove something about Jesus,"[108] and that something is his Messiahship,

---

[105] 1 Samuel 10:11-12. "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

[106] Acts 2:16-21, quoting Joel 2:28ff.

[107] Cf. 1 Corinthians 13:1, and 14:1-25.

[108] W. J. Lowstuter, class lecture at Boston University School of Theology, 1930.

which in turn validates the expectation of a speedy Parousia.

It is possible to assert, of course, that these objective manifestations were secondary items in the gift of the Spirit, and so understood by the early disciples. But the weight of evidence seems to show that it was "the pouring out of the Spirit" which was prophesied and in which they were interested; that "pouring out" is of primary significance because it proves that the "last days" are here.

The later development of a Christ-mysticism. Inasmuch as the line of thought we are developing leads from the earthly Mastership of Jesus, as friend and teacher and leader of his own small group of followers, directly to the quite social conception of the Kingdom, to be brought in by an exalted Christ, one wonders just where the matter of personal relation to Jesus comes in. It is indisputable that in Paul and in still later thinkers there is developed a real Christ-mysticism,[109] which is individualistic and ethical to a surprising extent. How could that ever have come about in the Christian movement as we have sketched it?

The answer is to be found in the nature of the Christian

---

[109] See Albert Schweitzer, The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle, for an extensive exposition of this. Schweitzer maintains that it was only through this Christ-mysticism that a really vital ethical note came into Christianity at all.

community and of the messianic salvation, and in the personality of Jesus himself. They had a close feeling of solidarity from the very first, and when tney thought of salvation they thougnt of their membership in the new kingdom. That kingdom took its name and its character from the Messian, and consequently, as time went on, they began to think of its blessedness as consisting largely of the fact of intimate fellowship with Christ. But that was something that could be had here and now, through a more spiritualized interpretation of the Holy Spirit. The ethical emphasis came in through the same sort of roundabout way: "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit."[110] We must reckon also with the personality of Jesus himself.

> It is sometimes argued that their devotion was centered on an imaginary, theological being, to whom they merely attached his name. But behind all the theology there was the memory of the historical Jesus, transforming abstract beliefs into personal faith and love.[111]

When the grosser manifestations of glossalaly and other objective "gifts" somewhat died out, it was easy for the disciples to interpret "the Spirit" in the deeper, more mystical sense. And the figure of the historical Jesus was what kept this from degenerating into innocuous vagueness.

---

[110] Gal. 5:25.

[111] Scott, The Gospel and Its Tributaries, pp. 53-54.

Summary. All of these special historical factors serve only to confirm the impression received from Acts I-XII, that the earliest message, as first preached after the Resurrection, consisted chiefly of the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus, as proof of the validity of his Messianic claims, and of the coming kingdom wherein all believers would find salvation. The message must at least be one which answers these requirements: it must emerge logically from Judaism, it must be news about an event rather than ethical advice or theological teaching, it must show organic connection with the life and message of Jesus, it must be simple enough to make reasonable the speedy conversions and baptisms recorded, it must give the resurrection a prominent place, it must explain the interest in the weird and objective manifestations of "the Spirit," and it must be a message out of which the Pauline Christ-mysticism could reasonably be expected to develop. Acts I-XII gives us a message which meets these requirements.

CHAPTER V

THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

Unquestionably the greatest news story that ever "broke" was the report of the resurrection of Jesus. The history indicates very clearly the truth of Scott's statement, "The church was created, if we look only to its immediate origin, by the belief that Christ had risen."[112] The first Christian message given to anyone after the last cry passed the lips of Jesus upon the cross was the report that He was not dead, but risen. So in a sense that bare announcement was the earliest Christian message. But of course, the mere declaration that someone is alive who has been supposed to be dead is not sufficient in itself to start a new world religion.

What was the essence of the message? The important consideration is what that announcement signified. It meant essentially two things, from which all the rest of Christian thought and hope is ultimately derived: (1) Jesus of Nazareth is designated and proved to be the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah; and (2) the kingdom whose coming he announced is there-

---

[112] The Beginnings of the Church, p. 259.

fore at hand, is even by the very fact of his resurrection begun. We have seen, from section to section and chapter to chapter, how the data point to this conclusion.

Some corollaries. While this was the essence of the very earliest Christian message, it carried with it implications or corollaries which began to be worked out almost immediately. Many of these have been indicated in chapter four and in other parts of the thesis, but we repeat them here for convenience' sake.

1 The exhortation to repentance always (in John, Jesus, and the early Christians) accompanied the announcement of the imminent coming of the kingdom. One must repent and be forgiven before one could qualify for a place in the kingdom at all. The shortness of the time made repentance all the more urgent. This need for repentance was particularly intensified in the thought of the disciples after the death of Jesus because they were speaking first to Jews, many of whom had undoubtedly been in the mob which shouted "Crucify him!" As murderers of the Just One, their sin had been particularly heinous.

2 Since the Messiah could never have been killed by wicked men unless God willed it so, not only must the Resurrection wipe out the stain of the cross, but the cross itself must be in some way discovered to have a part in the whole plan.

Whether we agree or not with those who say that Jesus came gradually to the place where he thought that God was willing to spare the world the awful pre-messianic tribulation if Jesus would suffer it himself,[113] we can see the first Christians groping toward the idea that in the act of dying on the cross Jesus had done something for them to make salvation possible. What could be more natural than that they should couple this with the obvious fact that sin was the great obstacle to the entry of any of them into the kingdom, and say with Paul, "Christ died for our sins?"[114]

3 Since Jesus is the Messiah, and future Judge of the world, it also follows that he is now the Lord and Master. He is alive and able to keep his promise of coming to be with his followers. Hence he is the authoritative Lord, and it is not long until we encounter the idea of a personal relationship between the servant and his Lord. The reasoning is this: in his earthly life, Jesus was Lord and Master of a group of disciples; now he is alive again, though usually invisible, and therefore takes up the old relationship again, in a new and glorified sense. In this way, a personal element and an intimacy are in-

---

[113] As in Schweitzer, op. cit., pp. 58, 59, etc.

[114] 1 Cor. 15:3. Arnold, op. cit., p. 178, says: "His death on the cross was the one great problem of the early church; it took precedence even over the doctrine and the problem of the kingdom."

troduced into religion that could never have arisen in connection with the thought of either a purely transcendent God or a vaguely immanent Spirit.

4 The death and resurrection of Jesus are in fulfillment of Messianic prophecy, and in themselves constitute the first outstanding events of the "last days." Other prophecies must also have been fulfilled. Matthew refers to a great many of them in the course of his gospel; some seem far-fetched to us, but it is the central idea that counts. One fulfillment of prophecies is in the matter of the pouring out of the Spirit upon the believers. In its primitive, objective form it is a plain sign of the approach of the End, as well as a token that the persons who receive it have been accepted for membership in the coming Kingdom.

5 The announcement that Jesus of Nazareth was Messiah had ethical implications also. He is Lord and Christ, and his words have become authoritative. Salvation consists in belonging to the Messianic kingdom, of which He is the head; all who belong to such a kingdom will want to conform their lives to the kingdom and the King. In Acts 9:2; 16:17; 18:25; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22 the disciples are represented as those who follow a certain way of life. The way is the way which would be appropriate for members of the community of the new age. This is not the essence of the earliest gospel by any means, but it

is a very early corollary.[115]

6 As time went on, it became necessary to think not only about the resurrection of Jesus, but about their own resurrection. Here, as in other questions that came up, they were inclined to repose their confidence in the fact that they were in fellowship and in contact with the risen Christ now, or rather, with the Spirit sent in his name, and that that contact or mystical union guaranteed the future for them, whether they lived or died.

The developmental nature of Christianity. It is a remarkable phenomenon that a religion which began with a message so closely tied in with a passing world view should persist and grow through twenty centuries. It has shown its power to change, grow, and develop, until if a first-century Christian were to walk into a twentieth-century church he would not know what to make of it. Cast as it was in the apocalyptic mold of the day, there was that within which was greater than the framework, and which eventually burst through the limited message in which it began. That which gave life and permanence to this Messianic movement, beyond all the many other such movements

---

[115] Bulcock, op. cit., p. 213, says: "The disciples would seek to live in the spirit of Christ because He was felt to be a Divine Benefactor in other directions--not because they recognized that this way of life was central in His Gospel. . ."

which seem to be superficially like it, was the personality of Jesus. The first Christians preached the coming of the Kingdom, as had Jesus. Only as time went on without the Kingdom's appearing in the apocalyptic sense did they come to realize it was not the Messianic hope with which they started, but the personality and power of their Master that gave permanent value to their movement.

Two things have made possible the marvellous capacity for development which has been exhibited by the Christian religion: (1) it looks back to Jesus of Nazareth, the most alive and creative personality the world has ever seen, as its Founder and Lord; and (2) it has in its heritage the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, one of whose functions it is to "lead us into all truth." With such a Lord, and with the belief in the present guidance and inspiration of God, Christianity is, has been, and always will be "on the march."

A DIGEST OF THE THESIS

It is the purpose of this study to determine, so far as possible, what constituted the earliest Christian message, as proclaimed by the first disciples in the period between the resurrection of Jesus and the beginning of the ministry of Paul.

We first examine the reports of Christian preaching in the book of Acts. We find that there are four discourses reported at some length, and many short references or allusions to the content of Christian preaching. Recognizing that we are reading not what the preachers actually said, but what Luke believes they meant to say, we value the testimony for the very lack of variety which at first sight makes it untrustworthy, for we see in it the reiteration of one simple message, which tradition in Luke's time evidently ascribed to the earliest Christians. The central point in all this preaching, as in the shorter allusions, is the resurrection of Jesus and his consequent vindication as Messiah.

The Synoptic gospels, especially Mark, and the Pauline epistles, especially 1 Thessalonians, give testimony from an earlier date than the book of Acts, but it confirms the essential correctness of the record in Acts. Mark emphasizes the Messiahship of Jesus, and the early Pauline epistles lay stress

on the Kingdom. Both sides of the picture are found in Acts.

There are a number of historical factors which must be taken into account in answering our question. Christianity must be explained as a movement that could logically spring from Judaism, and gain its first foothold among Jews. The word "gospel" is used in its primary sense of "good tidings," not in the modern derivative sense of "truth," or "morality." It must, then, refer to some objective occurrence. The early church began with the disciples of the earthly Jesus as a nucleus, and must have been closely related to him in its beliefs and teachings. There is no record that they thought they were proclaiming a different gospel from that which Jesus preached. People apparently became Christians very quickly, and were accepted as such with little or no instruction and preparation. The gospel was simple enough that it could be communicated to Paul in a vision and to an Ethiopian eunuch in a few minutes' conversation. The "immediate occasion" of the beginning of the Christian church was the resurrection of Jesus, which must therefore have a prominent place in the original message. The gift of the Holy Spirit seems at first to have been a strangely objective occurrence, which must have some significance in relation to the original message. Christianity developed very soon a sort of ethico-mysticism which turned out to be the most permanent part of it; its original form must have been one out of

which such a development could come.

The message of the earliest Christian believers consisted essentially of two co-ordinate propositions: (1) Jesus of Nazareth is designated and proved by his resurrection to be the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah; and (2) the kingdom whose coming he announced is therefore at hand, is even by the very fact of his resurrection already begun.

Many implications arise from these two propositions. The church worked out some of them almost immediately, and others are still, after nineteen centuries, in the process of unfolding. Christianity is not static, but dynamic.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

OPINIONS OF CERTAIN MODERN SCHOLARS ON THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

"The exaltation of Jesus is the fundamental Christian confession, and presupposes the resurrection; and it is this exaltation which here . . . is meant by His Lordship."
James Denney, The Expositor's Greek Testament, II, p.671.

"'Jesus is Lord' was the primitive confession. And 'Lord' was not a substitute for some other 'favorite self-designation of Jesus' in the Aramaic."
Benjamin Wisner Bacon, The Founding of the Church, p. 51.

"There was 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism'--but the content of that faith and its outward expression in the life of the local community cannot but have varied enormously from place to place.

"The first Christians did not regard themselves as a new society, but as the ancient 'people of God,' that is, as that portion of the Church of the Patriarchs and Prophets which had not, by rejecting the Messiah, forfeited its birthright and cut itself off from the 'promises of Israel' . . . The Christian position was that, by recognizing Jesus as Messiah, they and they alone understood the prophets aright."
B. H. Streeter, The Primitive Church, pp. 50, 51.

"From indications scattered through the Book of the Acts, we gather that an evangelic narrative described Jesus as fulfilling in His lineage, character, and actions the various foreshadowings of Messianic prophecy as hitherto accepted; while the fact that He had suffered, and died, and been raised the third day, was shown to reveal the Messianic character of passages of the OT which had not been hitherto clearly understood. The Resurrection, again, was declared to constitute an authentication by God Himself of the prediction of Jesus that He would come again to judge the living and the dead; and salvation from the terrors of the judgement to come was offered on the conditions of repentance, followed by baptism into the name of Jesus. This is the barest outline of the main features in

the first Christian preaching: the accomplishment in Jesus of all that was hoped for in the Christ; His death and resurrection illuminating the dark places of prophecy, and proving the truth of His own claims; judgment; repentance; baptism."

N. J. D. White, "Gospels," in A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels, I, p. 664.

"The question being which is the older, the portrait of Jesus on earth or the earliest preaching of Him as Messiah. It seems more probable that those who witnessed the triumph of Jesus over death by the Resurrection should at first be more impressed with the wonder of His Messiahship being thus miraculously established, than inclined to reminiscence of His words and acts during the ministry. 'The Lord is risen indeed,' and is proclaimed the Christ of God must have been their first idea and their earliest Message."

E. J. Foakes-Jackson, Studies in the Life of the Early Church, p. 50.

"In the case of Christianity, the 'spiritual bond' is the persistence, throughout all stages of development, of the essential character of the original Gospel as being first and foremost a message of 'good news about God.' . . . It is an essentially monotheistic faith, which from the beginning of its career has consistently claimed to be the true heir to the Jewish 'promises.' It presupposes the faith of the Old Testament. It proclaims the one God, who is also the God of the Jews; the living God, who is the Creator of the ends of the earth; the God both of Nature and of History, who is also and equally the God of Redemption and of grace."

A. E. J. Rawlinson, The New Testament Doctrine of the Christ, p. xi.

"The early Christians were, in short, a sect or guild of Jews who had added to Judaism certain new elements, especially the belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah; that He had risen from the dead; and that He would shortly return to judge the world."

John Elliotson Symes, The Evolution of the New Testament, p. 2.

"'Jesus is the Messiah,' and 'God raised him from the dead,' became twin and inseparable articles in the first creed (if the expression may be allowed of the primitive Christian community). Paul was expressing neither an individual belief nor a thought original with himself when he later put it to the Corinthians, 'If Christ hath not been raised, then is our

preaching vain; your faith is also vain."

Andrew C. Zenos, The Plastic Age of the Gospel, pp. 120-121.

"For the earliest believers the message of Jesus was inseparable from the apocalyptic hope, and in this fact we have the key to the subsequent history."

E. F. Scott, The Beginnings of the Church, p. 259.

"But the primary interest of the Apostles was to preach the gospel of the Kingdom; and that meant the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Divinely appointed Saviour, through whom all men may share the privileges of sonship with God."

Roberts, "Gospel," A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels, I, p. 663.

"It is a leading contention of the present work that the cult of the Lord Jesus was inherent in Christianity from the beginning, and that the eventual formulation of an explicit doctrine of our Lord's deity as the incarnate Son of God was necessitated by the fact that it provided the only ultimate intellectual justification of such a cultus which was compatible with monotheism."

A. E. J. Rawlinson, The New Testament Doctrine of the Christ, p. 237.

"The religion of the early church thus centred in the belief that Jesus was the Messiah and would presently return in his true character to bring in the Kingdom. All thinking had for its object the proof of the Messianic claim."

E. F. Scott, The First Age of Christianity, p. 183.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. BOOKS

Bacon, Benjamin Wisner, The Founding of the Church. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909. 90 pp.

Bigg, Charles, The Origins of Christianity. Edited by T. B. Strong. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909. 518 pp.

Box, G. H., Early Christianity and Its Rivals. A Study of the Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire at the Beginning of Our Era. New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1929. 128 pp.

Bulcock, H., Religion and Its New Testament Expression. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929.

Burkitt, F. Crawford, The Gospel History and Its Transmission. 4th impression; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1920.

Case, Shirley Jackson, The Evolution of Early Christianity. A Genetic Study of First-Century Christianity in relation to its Religious Environment. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1914. 385 pp.

Dibelius, Martin, From Tradition to Gospel. Translated from the revised second edition of Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums, in collaboration with the author, by Bertram Lee Woolf. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935. 311 pp.

von Dobschütz, Ernst, Christian Life in the Primitive Church. Translated by George Bremner and edited by E. D. Morrison. London: Williams and Norgate. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904. 438 pp.

Easton, Burton Scott, The Gospel before the Gospels. Lectures given on the Bishop Paddock Foundation, at the General Theological Seminary, New York, in December 1927, as the series for 1927-28. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928. 170 pp.

Foakes-Jackson, F. J., Studies in the Life of the Early Church. New York: George H. Doran Company, 1924. 263 pp.

Heffern, Andrew D., Apology and Polemic in the New Testament. The Bohlen Lectures, 1915. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922.

Lightfoot, Robert Henry, History and Interpretation in the Gospels. Bampton Lectures, 1934. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1934.

Rawlinson, A. E. J., The New Testament Doctrine of the Christ. Bampton Lectures, 1926. London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1926.

Schweitzer, Albert, The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle. Translated from Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus, by William Montgomery. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931. 411 pp.

Scott, Ernest F., The Beginnings of the Church. Lectures on the Ely Foundation. New York; Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914. 282 pp.

_____, The First Age of Christianity. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926. 242 pp.

_____, The Gospel and Its Tributaries. Kerr Lectures in the United Free Church College, Glasgow, 1927-28. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930. 295 pp.

Streeter, Burnett Hillman, The Primitive Church Studied with Special Reference to the Origins of the Christian Ministry. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929. 323 pp.

Symes, John Elliotson, The Evolution of the New Testament. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1922.

Zenos, Andrew C., The Plastic Age of the Gospel. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927.

B. PERIODICALS

Arnold, William R., "The Relation of Primitive Christianity to Jewish Thought and Teaching," Harvard Theological Review, XXIII, no. 3 (July 1930), pp. 161-179.

C. COMMENTARIES AND DICTIONARIES

Denney, James, "St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans," The Expositor's Greek Testament. W. Robertson Nicoll, editor, 7th edition, 5 vols.; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907-1910, II, 557-725.

Eiselen, Frederick Carl, with Edwin Lewis and David G. Downey, editors, The Abingdon Commentary. New York: The Abingdon Press, 1929. 1452 pp.

Hastings, James, editor, A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels. 2 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921-24.

Knowling, R. J., "The Acts of the Apostles," The Expositor's Greek Testament. W. Robertson Nicoll, editor, 7th edition, 5 vols.; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907-1910, II, 3-554.

Rackham, Richard Belward, The Acts of the Apostles, An Exposition. Westminster Commentaries. 11th edition; London: Methuen and Company, 1930. 524 pp.

BOSTON UNIVERSITY
1 1719 02544 6412